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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000539

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/20

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: Iran: Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, Prominent Dissident Cleric,
Dies

CLASSIFIED BY: Charles Pennypacker, Consular Officer, DOS, IRPO;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: According to Iranian press in early morning December 20, 87 year-old Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri died of natural causes in his Qom residence. Prominent reformist clerics have gone to his house to pay their condolences, and his funeral ceremony will occur December 21 in Qom.

12. (C) SUMMARY (CONT): Montazeri was a seminal figure in the Islamic Republic from even before its start, serving initially as Khomeini's main representative in Iran during Khomeini's 16 year exile abroad. Post-revolution he championed enshrining the principle of 'Supreme Jurisprudent' in the Constitution, and subsequently was named as Khomeini's heir in this position in 1985. However due to disagreements with Khomeini he was removed from this position in 1989 and subsequently became one of the regime's foremost clerical critics, challenging Supreme Leader Khamenei's religious credentials and also arguing that the Supreme Leader was accountable to both the people and to the Iranian Constitution. Since the June 12 Presidential elections he lent considerable rhetorical support to the 'Green Path' opposition. With his passing the opposition loses one of its main pillars of support among Iran's senior clergy. As for popular reaction, it is too soon to tell whether his death will vitiate or energize the opposition, although opposition sites report that memorial services have already started at University of Tehran. END SUMMARY.

13. (U) On December 20 Iranian press announced the death of prominent Iranian oppositionist cleric 87-year old Grand Ayatollah (GA) Haj Sheikh Hossein Ali Montazeri. His son Hojjatoleslam Ahmad Montazeri told Iranian press that his father died December 20 at 0130 hours due to cardiac arrest. According to a press statement issued by his son Ahmad, the funeral service for GA Montazeri will be Monday December 21 at 0900, moving from his home in Qom in a procession towards The Shrine of Hazrat-e Masumeh Mosque (the Shrine of Fatimeh, sister of the Eighth Imam, is the holiest site in Qom). (NOTE: An IRPO contact passed on rumors that the security forces were sending personnel to Qom, suggesting that the government may attempt to prevent ceremonies from becoming a platform for anti-regime protests. END NOTE)

14. (U) According to reformist and oppositionist websites, many prominent clerics (mostly reformist) have made their way to Montazeri's home in Qom to pay condolences, to include:

- Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili
- Grand Ayatollah Mousa Shobeiri Zanjani
- Grand Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi-Golpayegani
- Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sanei

- Grand Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat-Zanjani,
- Ayatollah Haj Shaykh Ebrahim Amini
- Grand Ayatollah Gerami (Qomi)

¶5. (U) Iranian press coverage of GA Montazeri's death varied based on political affiliation. Official media was the briefest in its coverage, omitting his clerical rank and any mention of his activities once he was dismissed as Khomeini's successor in 1989. Representing official coverage was the IRGC-affiliated Farsnews, who reported as follows:

Title: Hossein Ali Montazeri Dies at 87 Years of Age

Text: Hossein Ali Montazeri died last night at 87 years of age in his home. At the beginning of the Revolution Montazeri was chosen as the Deputy to the Supreme Leader but due to taking positions against the Islamic Regime Imam Khomeini removed him from his position on March 28, 1989.

¶6. (U) Iran's English language 'PressTV' gave slightly more detail while at the same time glossing over Montazeri's oppositionist activities, saying that that after Montazeri was relieved of his post in 1989, he "focused the rest of his life on religious writings and teaching at his home in the holy city of Qom." The most daring major news outlet in its coverage was the semi-official Islamic Labor News Agency, which not only referred to him as 'Ayatollah Montazeri,' but also included most of his son Ahmad's statement in its coverage. Significantly, the website "Ayandenews,"

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affiliated with the anti-Ahmadinejad Principlists covered his death in a relatively extensive piece that focused on his impeccable revolutionary credentials while also citing his "defense of the rights of all classes" in his final years. This piece noted that even while dismissing him from his position as his successor, Khomeini referred to Montazeri as "the fruit of his [i.e. Khomeini's] life."

¶7. (U) Oppositionist website 'Rahesabz' (affiliated with dissident cleric Mohsen Kadivar) reported that members of University of Tehran's Islamic Association had as of 10 30 AM begun the traditional 'reading from the Quran' in the University's mosque, in addition to distributing dates (another traditional activity). According to 'Rahesabz,' an increasing number of students are going to the ceremony, and it is rumored that many University of Tehran student groups seek to have classes canceled in order to conduct mourning ceremonies.

FROM REGIME ARCHITECT TO FOREMOST CRITIC

¶8. (U) Montazeri was a seminal figure in the Islamic Republic from even before its start. A long-time student of Ayatollah Khomeini, he served as Khomeini's main representative in Iran during Khomeini's 16-year exile abroad (1963-79). Post-revolution he was a champion of enshrining the principle of 'Supreme Jurisprudent' in the Constitution, and subsequently was named as Khomeini's heir in ¶1985. However, due to disagreements with Khomeini over primarily the mass executions of oppositionists in 1989 and separately the arrest and execution of a family member, Khomeini removed him from this position in 1989.

¶9. (U) After this dismissal he gradually became one of the regime's foremost clerical critics, challenging both Supreme Leader Khamenei's religious credentials and also more generally arguing that the Supreme Leader was accountable to both the people and to the Iranian Constitution. The IRIG attempted to silence him by cutting off his access to the media, imprisoning or executing his clerical supporters, and even putting him under house arrest from 1997-2003, releasing him only when it appeared that his poor health might lead to his death.

¶10. (U) After the June 12, 2009 election Montazeri used perhaps the strongest language of anyone still in Iran to publically

protest the election and the subsequent crackdown. He asserted that the results "cannot be accepted by anyone of sound mind," and accused the IRIG of attempting to settle "political scores" by arresting or detaining its detractors. In July he issued a fatwa that his supporters interpreted to mean that Khamenei's rule is religiously illegitimate and that it was the duty of believers to oppose his rule.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Montazeri's death relieves the IRIG of one of its most prominent and persistent clerical critics. His outspoken attacks combined with his clerical stature gave other regime opponents some political cover in their criticism of the government as well - cover now lost. Along with Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sanei, Montazeri was seen by many as one of the two clerical 'leaders' of the "Green Movement" opposition, although it is unclear how many religious followers ('moqaled') he had, or more generally how much of a political following he had among Iranians. It remains to be seen whether the 'Green Movement' opposition chooses to, and is successful in, using ceremonies associated with the commemoration of his death for its own political purposes, either in Qom among the clergy, or in urban streets and universities. END COMMENT.
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